

Future of historic post office remains uncertain

□ Any new owner must abide by historic preservation covenant

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The next owner of the downtown Camas post office building will need to take into account the historical integrity of the structure, which was built more than seven decades ago and has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1991.

According to Greg Griffith, deputy state historic preservation officer with the State Department of Archeology and Historic Preservation, many post office buildings around the state are in the same boat as the downtown Camas facility — they are being put up for sale in response to dwindling revenues.

"We are aware that the United States Postal Service has had to sell some of its historic post offices — and ones that are not historic," he said. "We have been working with them on the post offices in Washington State."

The Camas main post office was built in 1939 in Colonial Revival style. The brick building is topped with a square wooden cupola. On the lobby wall is a 5- by 12-foot mural titled "Beginning of a New World" made in "egg temptra" on canvas by Douglas Nicholson in 1941.

It was announced earlier this month that in an effort to cut costs USPS officials decided to put the 440 N.E. Fifth Ave. property on the market and move the retail and post office box services it provides into an existing space in the Camas carrier annex — located about 1½ miles away on property the USPS leases, on a long-term basis, at 2455 S.E. Eighth Ave.

"It is important to know that in these current economic conditions, the Postal Service, which is self-supporting and receives no tax dollars for our operations, must make sound business decisions regarding costs," said Ron Anderson, public relations coordinator for the Portland postal district. "It makes no sense to operate

from two different locations in such close proximity when Postal Service operations can be consolidated into one location and maintain efficient mail delivery service."

Anderson said earlier this month that "for sale" signs could be posted at the building in the next couple of weeks. An asking price has not been officially determined, he said, adding that moving forward on closure of the downtown office and implementing consolidation is not contingent upon securing a buyer.

If the building is purchased, the new owner must abide by a series of standards or "common sense approaches" that are detailed in a historic preservation covenant that is attached to the sales agreement.

"The owner is obligated to abide by that covenant because it goes on record and is attached to the deed," Griffith said. Examples of the standards include preserving the character of the building, and repairing rather than replacing unique elements of the structure such as windows and framing.

According to Griffith, with the right buyer there are other potential uses for such a building that could include offices, an art studio or gallery.

"We are not too sure and a little nervous about what the future use might be," he said. "Our concern is the long-term preservation of the building. Its character is important to us. I think it is up to someone with a lot of creativity and creative thinking to come up with some new uses for that kind of building."

According to Caroline Mercury of the Downtown Camas Association, these same issues are on the minds of local residents and surrounding merchants, whose businesses will be impacted when and if the busy, centrally located post office does close its doors.

"Though we are beyond disappointed by this decision, our next approach would be to encourage the preservation of the building and find it's next best purpose to serve the community."